

# Disembodied Souls Without Dualism: Thomas Aquinas on Why You Won't Go to Heaven When You Die (but Your Soul Just Might)

By Adam Wood

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What happens to us after we die? Many Christians hope that they will go to heaven. Their bodies won't, of course; we'll bury or cremate those. But their souls can and will survive in a disembodied state, and the same goes for the Christian persons themselves. Later, at some point in the future, God will resurrect all of us by rejoining us and our souls to bodies. Familiar as this story may be, in recent years many Christian philosophers, theologians and psychologists alike have challenged it, arguing that there aren't any disembodied souls in heaven or anywhere else, and so such souls shouldn't play any part in what Christians hope for. Instead, Christian hope should be in the bodily resurrection alone. The debate on this issue is a live one. My central aim here is to defend as plausible and attractive a position not much discussed nowadays, which represents a middle ground between the two camps just mentioned. It is the view of Thomas Aquinas. According to Aquinas, human souls are indeed capable of surviving in a disembodied state, and without disembodied souls it would be difficult to explain the possibility of some important Christian teachings concerning life after death, such as the resurrection and the so-called "intermediate state" between death and rising again. On the other hand, the recent wave of disembodied-soul-skeptics are correct that it is much easier to explain the tremendous theological significance Christianity attaches to the bodily resurrection if human persons do not survive death, so that our hope for eternal life rests entirely in God's raising us from the dead. The lesson to draw from this situation, Thomas would say, is that while human souls do indeed survive death in a disembodied state, human persons do

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I argue in defense of a particular answer to the question "what happens to us after we die?" While not much discussed nowadays, it was, I believe, the view of Thomas Aquinas. The view is that while human souls are capable of surviving death in a disembodied state, and remain in that state capable of certain types of conscious experiences, human persons cease to exist at death. I defend first the "cessationist" aspect of this view, arguing that we can best make sense of the tremendous importance the Christian tradition places upon the bodily resurrection if we maintain that human persons cease to exist between dying and rising again. I then defend the "dualist" aspect of the view, offering several reasons for thinking that human souls survive death. I conclude by responding to a series of philosophical and theological objections. **Adam Wood** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Wheaton College.

not. We cease to exist at death. We don't, strictly speaking, go to heaven when we die, or anywhere else. Our souls do survive our deaths, however, and on the last day God will raise us back to life by rejoining them with our bodies. My claim in this paper is that this position of Aquinas's is one that anybody interested in thinking in a Christian way about what happens to them when they die ought seriously to consider.

I'll refer to Aquinas's position below as "cessationist dualism," since it holds that human persons cease to exist at death, although their souls do not. It stands in contrast both to "survivalist" forms of dualism, on which humans do survive death, and to accounts that reject disembodied souls entirely. As my title indicates, though, I would be content to refrain from calling the view I'm defending dualism at all. As it also indicates, I believe my position is the very one that Thomas Aquinas held, and that he held it for roughly the same reasons I am going to elaborate. I'll focus here, however, on defending the view itself, rather than its Thomist bona fides, although I'll indicate some reasons for attributing it to Aquinas as I go along. Those interested can consult the footnotes for discussion of some interpretative debates regarding how best to understand Thomas himself.

I'll proceed as follows. In the first section I'll defend the "cessationist" aspect of the view, articulating one reason that both Aquinas and recent philosophers offer for denying that you or I will survive our deaths. It stems (as just mentioned) from the idea that survivalism cannot adequately account for the theological significance Christianity accords the bodily resurrection. In the second section, I defend the "dualist" aspect of the view, explaining why retaining disembodied souls provides significant philosophical and theological benefits when it comes to accounting for the possibility of the resurrection and the intermediate state. In the final section, I consider a series of objections against cessationist dualism, and conclude by taking stock of some benefits it offers.

## Why We Won't Survive Our Deaths

A good place to begin is with the Lutheran theologian Oscar Cullmann's 1955 Ingersoll lecture, entitled "Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead: The Witness of the New Testament."<sup>1</sup> Its goal was to separate what Cullmann took to be the genuinely Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection from what he saw as an un-Christian incursion from Greek philosophy: belief in the soul's immortality.

<sup>1</sup>"Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead: The Witness of the New Testament," in *Immortality and Resurrection*, ed. Krister Stendahl (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 9–53. It is worth noting that in the following year's Ingersoll Lecture the historian and classicist Harry Wolfson responded to Cullmann by arguing that to the fathers of the church, belief in the immortality of the soul and belief in the resurrection of the body were "inseparably connected with each other." As Wolfson puts it, "the belief that in the end of days there will be a general resurrection of the dead *meant* the reinvestment of surviving souls with risen bodies." See "Immortality and Resurrection in the Philosophy of the Church Fathers," in *Immortality and Resurrection*, ed. Stendahl, 54–96 at 55.

The lecture's rhetorical centerpiece contrasts the serene discourse on immortality just before Socrates's death in Plato's *Phaedo* with Jesus's agony in the garden and on the cross. The aim is to draw out the notion of death as a feared enemy on the Christian conception, as opposed to the Greek notion of death as release from bodily imprisonment. Cullmann also emphasizes that the Christian eschatological hope is placed in resurrected life with bodies freed from sin's corruption by God's grace, rather than in the everlasting life of souls immortal by their very nature. He doesn't go so far as to deny the possibility of any part of us surviving death before resurrection. His effort to sever immortality from resurrection doctrinally is a cautious one. But we might shape the dialectical thrust of Cullmann's lecture into an explicit argument against survivalist dualism (AS) as follows:

(AS1) Christians shouldn't endorse any theory that has a vastly more difficult time than its alternatives in accounting for the theological significance of their central doctrines.

(AS2) Survivalism has a vastly more difficult time than its alternative, cessationism, in accounting for the theological significance of the bodily resurrection.

(AS3) Therefore, Christians shouldn't be survivalists.

While I don't take this line of reasoning to offer anything like a knock-down argument against the view that human persons survive death, I do think it tells significantly in favor of cessationism as an alternative. Here I'll first present a brief case for (AS1), with especial attention to the doctrine of the bodily resurrection. I'll then defend (AS2) by explaining why, on the face of it, cessationists have a considerably easier time explaining the bodily resurrection's theological significance than survivalists do.

To begin with, consider that it would have been a relatively straightforward matter for St. Paul to "sell" the Athenian audience of his Mars Hill address on the notion of immortal souls. Barring the Epicureans, who were rather notorious in antiquity for denying personal immortality, most other Greek philosophers of the time, be they Stoics or Platonists, would have agreed that souls are capable of surviving in a disembodied state. Yet Paul insisted on preaching that Christ was raised from the dead. The response was predictable: "when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked" (Acts 17:32). Philosophers who considered the aim of their way of life to be escape from bodies thought it absurd that the culminating event in Paul's speech should be a *return* to embodiment *after* such an escape.

The second-century philosopher Celsus provides, perhaps, a typical Greek reaction to the doctrine of the resurrection:

It is foolish of them [i.e., the Christians] to suppose that, when God applies the fire (like a cook!) all the rest of mankind will be thoroughly roasted and that they alone will survive, not merely those who are alive at the time, but those also long dead who will rise up from the earth possessing the same bodies as before. This is simply the hope of worms. For what sort of human soul would have any further desire for a body that has rotted? [This doctrine] ...is both revolting and impossible. For what sort of body, after being entirely corrupted, could return to its original nature and that same condition which it had before it was dis-

solved? As they have nothing to say in reply, they escape to a most outrageous refuge by saying "that anything is possible to God."<sup>2</sup>

Outrageous indeed, to the Greek mind in the early days of the Church. Aristotle had argued in *De generatione et corruptione* 2.11.338b16–17 that "those things whose substance is perishable," i.e., corruptible things, can only "return upon themselves" specifically, not numerically. That is, a cloud might perish and another cloud be generated in its stead, but numerically one and the same cloud, having perished, could never return. Yet this is precisely what Christians claim happens in the resurrection.

Importantly, however, the supposed metaphysical impossibility of the resurrection (to which I'll return in the next section of this paper) is only part of what Celsus finds so absurd about the doctrine. He has another complaint: hope for bodily resurrection is "simply the hope of worms." It is not just a metaphysically absurd doctrine. It is also "revolting." It is bizarre and primitive. It is philosophically and theologically unmotivated. And so on.

Celsus's attitude typifies the difficulties early Christians must have faced in explaining the theological significance of the resurrection to their contemporaries. Given these severe difficulties, it seems to me all the more exigent that we nowadays reject any theory incapable of explaining adequately why the early Christians considered them worth facing. If survivalism turns out to be incapable of explaining to Celsus and his ilk why Christian hope in the resurrection is worthwhile, then Christians simply shouldn't be survivalists. And it seems that survivalists do have a difficult time motivating the doctrine of the resurrection in comparison with cessationists, as Aquinas and more recent thinkers alike have recognized.

Trenton Merricks, for example, thinks we are identical with our bodies, and hence rejects the notion of disembodied human persons. He argues as follows:

Our being identical with our bodies makes perfect sense of the idea that the resurrection of our bodies will be the resurrection of us. What if we were not identical with our bodies? Then it would be hard, if not impossible, to make sense of the idea that dead people will be resurrected. Moreover, the importance of the doctrine that, on the Day of Resurrection, one gets a body identical with the body one had in this life would be difficult to explain. Indeed, I cannot think of any plausible explanation at all, much less one that rivals the very straightforward and absolutely compelling explanation that flows directly from the claim that each of us is identical with his or her body. I think that all of this gives those of us who believe in the resurrection of the body—and who are committed to its importance—a good reason to conclude that we are identical with our respective bodies.<sup>3</sup>

The point is that on Merricks's view, there is a "straightforward and absolutely compelling explanation" why the bodily resurrection matters. Since we are our

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Origen, *Contra Celsum* 5.14, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 274.

<sup>3</sup>Trenton Merricks, "The Resurrection of the Body," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, eds. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 476–490 at 484.

bodies, we have no hope for eternal life apart from God raising us bodily from the dead. In contrast, if we are capable of surviving death as disembodied souls, why would God need to resurrect us? Merricks says he “cannot think of any plausible explanation at all.” I think he overstates the case a bit here; in a moment I’ll consider one possible explanation survivalists might put forward.

Before I do, however, it is worth noting the way Aquinas agrees with the basic contours of Merricks’s reasoning. Commenting on St. Paul’s claim in 1 Cor. 15:19 that “if in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied,” Aquinas takes the Apostle to be giving an argument of the following sort:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, it follows that nothing good is possessed by men except in this life alone; and if this is so, then those who suffer many evils and tribulations in this life are more miserable. Therefore, since the apostles and Christians suffer many tribulations, it follows that they are more miserable than other men, who at least enjoy the good things of this world.<sup>4</sup>

A cogent enough line of reasoning. Certainly St. Paul faced many tribulations, and the rest of us Christians should probably expect to as well! If there is no resurrection, then we Christians have nothing to hope for beyond this life. Hence if our lives here are full of tribulations, we must be accounted miserable indeed. Aquinas notes, however, that someone might raise the following “doubt” against St. Paul’s argument:

What the Apostle says does not seem to be universally true, namely, that Christians are confident in this life only, because [an objector] could say that, although our bodies do not possess any good things except in this life, which is mortal, yet according to the soul they have many good things in the other life.<sup>5</sup>

Our hope for future glory does *not* reside solely in the resurrection, according to this objection. Our bodies may cease to exist when this life is over, yet *we* do not cease to exist, and “according to the soul” we may go on to enjoy “many good things in the other life.” Aquinas thinks this objection fails, for this simple reason: “The soul, since it is part of man’s body, is not an entire man, and my soul is not I; hence, although the soul obtains salvation in another life, nevertheless, not I or any man.”<sup>6</sup> Thomas’s claim here is quite striking. The soul is just *part* of a human body. It is not an entire human. So even if human souls enjoy good things in another life, it doesn’t follow that any humans will. According to Thomas, St. Paul is quite correct to pin our entire hope for future glory on the resurrection. Without it, there will be no “us.”<sup>7</sup> Like Merricks, then, Aquinas has a straightforward explanation of the bodily resurrection’s theological significance. Can survivalist

<sup>4</sup>Aquinas, *Super I Epistolam B. Pauli ad Corinthios lectura* (henceforth *In 1 Cor.*) 15.2.923, trans. Fabian Larcher.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, ¶924.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, ¶925.

<sup>7</sup>It should be noted that whether Aquinas thinks human persons survive death is a matter of hot debate in recent literature. Eleonore Stump, Jason Eberl and Christopher Brown all

dualists muster any similarly compelling explanation?

John W. Cooper suggests one possible way of answering this question. He argues that the scriptures support what he calls "holistic dualism," which he describes as follows:

Holism...affirms the functional unity of some entity in its totality, the integration and interrelation of all the parts in the existence and proper operation of the whole. It views an entity as a single primary functional system....It recognizes entities as phenomenological and existential unities. It implies that the parts do not operate independently of the whole, and that they would not continue to have all the same properties and functions if the whole were broken up.<sup>8</sup>

So Cooper's "holism" emphasizes the unity of human persons. On the other hand, he also says:

[H]olism does not necessarily imply that if the system were broken up, all parts disintegrate into chaos or nothingness. Secondary systems might continue to exist, although without all the properties and capacities they had when integrated within the whole....On this view souls, spirits, minds or persons might be able to exist without organisms, although they have been deprived by the loss.<sup>9</sup>

Cooper is a survivalist dualist, and believes that holism allows for the possibility of human persons existing as disembodied souls.<sup>10</sup> He indicates in these passages, however, that such a mode of existence might involve human persons being "deprived" of certain "properties and functions" they enjoy as soul-body composites. Might he rely on this "deprivation" to respond to my argument against survivalism?

This will depend, presumably, on what sort of deprivation Cooper has in mind. He says he isn't much interested in speculating about what disembodied life during the intermediate state would be like. But let us consider what disadvantages disembodied souls might face. Presumably disembodied souls can no longer eat avocados, go fly fishing, or kneel in prayer. Losing opportunities like these would seem, I must agree, a loss indeed. Perhaps, then, by relying on Cooper's holism, survivalists might cite enough losses disembodied souls would face to grant bodily resurrection the theological significance it surely deserves.

Perhaps, I say, but I doubt it. Cooper cites Richard Swinburne as an allied "holistic dualist," and Swinburne would say that souls are capable of the full range of conscious experiences most post-Cartesians ascribe to the realm of the

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interpret Aquinas as a survivalist, while Robert Pasnau, Christina Van Dyke and Patrick Toner agree with my corruptionist reading. The former group of commentators certainly view passages like the one I've just discussed as problematic, but think they can be brought in line with their interpretation. Stump helpfully explains how in "Resurrection, Reassembly and Reconstitution: Aquinas on the Soul," in B. Niederbacher and E. Runggaldier, eds., *Die mensliche Seele: Brauchen wir den Dualismus?* (Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag, 2006), 151–71 at 166–69.

<sup>8</sup>John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 45.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 45–46.

<sup>10</sup>See for example Ibid., 163.

mental.<sup>11</sup> If Cooper agrees with Swinburne about this, then he believes that a robust conscious life is still a possibility during the intermediate state. This poses a problem for anyone wishing to maintain that disembodied existence is a serious “deprivation.” As good as eating avocados, fly fishing, and kneeling in prayer are, what is truly best for us is unity with God through knowing and loving him. What we hope for is to see God “face to face”; to “know fully, even as [we have] been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Like Paul, compared with knowing Christ we count all else as rubbish (Phil. 3:8). So long as Cooper maintains a Swinburne-type account of the conscious states that souls can experience, unity with God through knowing him and loving him—ultimate beatitude for human beings—would seem just as readily available to disembodied souls as to soul-body composites. Even if Cooper followed Aquinas in excluding sense-experiences from those available to disembodied souls, he would still have to say that such souls are capable of knowing and loving God.<sup>12</sup> If this is true, however, then disembodied existence isn’t much of a deprivation at all. Indeed, why shouldn’t Cooper agree with Socrates that “the soul can best reflect when it is free from all distractions and... has as little as possible to do with the body...in its search for reality”?<sup>13</sup> After all, Socrates is surely right that bodies are often inconvenient. But in that case it seems like “holistic dualism” offers little to the survivalist dualist in terms of accounting for the resurrection’s theological significance.

I’m sure there are other strategies survivalists might employ to explain why the bodily resurrection is so important. For this reason, as I mentioned above, I don’t take the argument from (AS1)–(AS3) to represent a decisive case against the notion that human persons survive their deaths. All that I am suggesting is that cessationism offers a much more straightforward route than its rival toward explaining why we hope that God will raise our bodies from the dead, and that this counts as telling evidence in its favor. Of course, if it turns out that there is powerful evidence against cessationism, or that it is philosophically incoherent, these factors might overwhelm the case I’ve offered on its behalf. In section three below I’ll consider various objections along these lines. First, however, let me explain why I think cessationists should continue to believe in disembodied human souls, even while denying the existence of disembodied human persons.

## Why Our Souls Will Survive Our Deaths

As mentioned in the first paragraph of this paper, my reasoning here relies on two things Christians believe will happen after we die: that we will be resur-

<sup>11</sup>For Cooper’s support of Swinburne, see *Ibid.*, 220–222. For Swinburne’s own view, see for instance *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 1–3 in which he lists “sensations, thoughts, purposes, desires, and beliefs” as among the “different facets of the mental life.”

<sup>12</sup>Aquinas denies that separated souls will be capable of sense experiences in *Summa theologiae* (henceforth ST) 1a.77.8.

<sup>13</sup>Plato, *Phaedo* 65c, trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedo.html>.

rected someday, and that there will be an "intermediate state" between death and rising again. It is relatively straightforward to explain how these events are possible if there are disembodied souls but difficult, if not impossible, without them. To make this argument for disembodied souls (DS) explicit:

(DS1) Christians shouldn't endorse any theory that has a vastly more difficult time than its rivals in accounting for the possibility of their central doctrines.

(DS2) It is vastly more difficult to account for the possibility of the resurrection and the intermediate state if we reject disembodied souls than if we accept them.

(DS3) Christians should accept, rather than reject, the existence of disembodied souls.

Just as with the argument of the previous section, I don't take this to represent a knock-down case against Christian physicalists or others who deny the existence (or possibility) of disembodied souls. I do think it provides evidence in favor of such souls, but just as with my previous argument, this evidence might be overridden if it turns out that there are compelling arguments against disembodied souls (understood along cessationist lines). Again, I'll consider several objections below. Since I take premise (DS1) to be fairly obvious, I'll focus in this section on defending (DS2).

I'll begin with the intermediate state. Cooper has extensively surveyed the biblical evidence supporting both the idea that the resurrection will be a future, general event correlated with Christ's second coming, the final judgment, and the inauguration of the new heaven and new earth, and the idea that before this event souls exist in a conscious intermediate state.<sup>14</sup> I will not repeat this evidence here. One proposed way of accounting for it is by claiming that we are resurrected immediately after we die into an "intermediate state body," then again later into a resurrection body.<sup>15</sup> By my lights, however, this suggestion faces significant difficulties. First, there is the question where intermediate state bodies are located. Those brought back to life in the future, general resurrection will be located here on earth, albeit in a renewed, restored creation. But this theologically attractive account seems unavailable when it comes to bodies resurrected immediately after death. Second, there is the question of why a future, general resurrection should carry much or any theological significance when we are capable of enjoying beatitude immediately after death in our intermediate state bodies—a version of the argument I posed against survivalist dualism in the previous section. While proponents of an immediate resurrection might conceivably find ways of addressing these difficulties, I think they indicate that the immediate-resurrection view faces an uphill struggle adequately accounting for the idea that a future, general resurrection will be preceded by an intermediate state. In my estimation disembodied-soul-skeptics are better off interpreting the biblical texts pointing to a conscious intermediate state in a non-literal way, and maintaining that there

<sup>14</sup>See Cooper's *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting*, especially pp. 116–119 and chaps. 6–8.

<sup>15</sup>Lynne Rudder Baker makes this proposal in "Christian Materialism in a Scientific Age," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 70.1 (2011): 47–59 at 55.

is simply a gap in our existence between death and the resurrection.

Supposing I'm right about this, is there anything wrong with acknowledging such a gap? Merricks doesn't think so. Because Christians agree that the resurrection will take place by a miracle on the part of an omnipotent God, Merricks doubts that any will find themselves in a position to demonstrate the impossibility of such a miracle taking place.

As far as I can tell, however, Aquinas would disagree. When it comes to physical entities like humans, Aquinas thinks our being the particular humans we are is at least partly a matter of our having had the particular spatio-temporal starting points we did.<sup>16</sup> That is, coming to exist at the particular time and place I did marks me with something like the indelible "time stamp" on a digital photo. No entity coming to exist at difference time or place would be me, no matter how much it resembled me. In this respect Aquinas endorses something like the "origins essentialism" defended in recent years by Saul Kripke among others; no physical entity can have two temporally distinct sets of origins. But Thomas would go on to point out that this is exactly what is supposed to take place on Merricks' view, which has us ceasing altogether to exist for a time, then coming to exist again on the day of the resurrection. The miracle Merricks describes is thus impossible, even for an omnipotent God.<sup>17</sup>

Now one thing Merricks might ask Aquinas if presented with this argument is why we should suppose that merely resuming the life we led before our deaths should count as "coming to exist" in the way being conceived in the first place surely did. Even if we accept Aquinas's essentialism about temporal origins, might we nevertheless evade his argument by claiming that resurrection is *not* an origin, but merely a resumption? Possibly, if we could give some principled reason for making this claim. What might such a reason look like? Consider the metaphysical "just so story" Dean Zimmerman proposes to show how God might enable our lives to straddle temporal gaps.<sup>18</sup> At the moment of our deaths, God imparts

<sup>16</sup>Briefly, Aquinas repeatedly claims that "designated matter" (*materia signata*) is the principle of individuation of material forms. Designated matter, he usually says, is matter with "determinate" dimensions. Which dimensions are these? By my lights, the most plausible answer is that they're the dimensions I start out with — i.e., my spatio-temporal starting points. As is the case with just about anything one might say about Aquinas's views on individuation, however, what I say here is controversial among interpreters. The literature on the subject is vast. My interpretation resembles Robert Pasnau's in *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 391–393.

<sup>17</sup>This isn't an argument Aquinas makes explicit, and whether Thomas would in fact endorse it is disputed in the literature. I defend the interpretation of Aquinas just described in "Mind the Gap? The Principle of Non-Repeatability and Aquinas's Account of the Resurrection," *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* 3 (2015): 99–127. Turner Nevitt challenges my interpretation in "Don't Mind the Gap: A Reply to Adam Wood," *Oxford Studies in Medieval Philosophy* 4 (2016): 198–214.

<sup>18</sup>Dean Zimmerman, "The Compatibility of Materialism and Survival: The 'Falling Elevator' Model," *Faith and Philosophy* 16.2 (1999): 194–212. To be clear, Zimmerman doesn't *actually* believe this is the way God will resurrect us; he just thinks it describes one sort of miracle an omnipotent God is capable of bringing about.

a miraculous fissioning power to every atom of our body. One of the two bodies resulting from the activation of this power goes on to die immediately. The other “jumps” ahead to the day of resurrection. As soon as it arrives there, God undoes whatever damage was about to kill me off. And there I am, back from the dead! Zimmerman called this the “falling elevator model” of the resurrection in deference to the cartoon physics on which characters can save themselves from death by jumping in a falling elevator the second before it hits bottom. Importantly, on Zimmerman’s story it isn’t that God simply recreates us in the future. Rather we show up in the future as a result of our own fissioning power, miraculous as it may be. Accordingly, Zimmerman might say, on his story we merely resume lives we led previously rather than coming to exist anew due to the causal relations connecting our past and future temporal stages.

I doubt Aquinas would accept this reply to his original argument. He would insist that causal processes such as Zimmerman’s fissioning event require temporal continuity themselves, and hence couldn’t straddle temporal gaps in the way the falling elevator model presupposes.<sup>19</sup> Zimmerman points out, however, that there are many accounts of causation on offer other than Aquinas’s, and that on many of them effects can indeed lie at a temporal distance from their causes.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps, then, the most Aquinas is in a position to say is that *if* one agrees with him that causal processes can’t be temporally “gappy,” *then* Zimmerman’s story won’t work.

There are, however, other reasons for doubting the feasibility of Zimmerman’s model. One concern, suggested by William Hasker and others, involves the possibility of “double-fissioning”—i.e., the possibility of my miraculous fissioning power producing *two* seemingly identical bodies on the day of resurrection.<sup>21</sup> Which would be me? Hasker and others have claimed that Zimmerman has no good way of answering.<sup>22</sup> Whether they are right about this is still subject to considerable debate in the literature. It may yet turn out that some account like Zimmerman’s can indeed secure the possibility of the resurrection while leaving disembodied souls out of the picture. Whether any such account can do so is, at the very least, open to serious questioning.

What I’d like to point out in the remainder of this section, however, is how disembodied souls provide Aquinas a straightforward way of explaining why the human persons who are raised on the last day are identical to the humans

<sup>19</sup>Aquinas follows Aristotle in claiming that the continuity of a motion, such as a causal process, requires temporal continuity; see Aquinas’s *Sententia super Physicam* 5.6.699–702.

<sup>20</sup>Zimmerman, “Falling Elevator,” 204–205.

<sup>21</sup>William Hasker, *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 225–231.

<sup>22</sup>Zimmerman replies to Hasker in “Bodily Resurrection: The Falling Elevator Model Revisited,” in *Personal Identity and Resurrection: How To Survive Your Death*, ed. G. Gasser (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 33–50. Hasker isn’t satisfied with Zimmerman’s reply, however, and explains why in “Materialism and the Resurrection: Are the Prospects Improving?” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 3 (2011): 83–103. Nor is Hasker the only one to suggest the line of attack involving possible duplicates against Zimmerman; see also Jonathan Loose, “Constitution and the Falling Elevator: The Continuing Incompatibility of Materialism and Resurrection Belief,” *Philosophia Christi* 14.2 (2012): 439–449.

who previously died. One might initially worry that Thomas's argument against the possibility of temporal gaps in a physical thing's existence cuts equally hard against his own account, given his cessationism. If Aquinas thinks human persons cease to exist when they die, then won't they have two temporally distinct sets of origins, one at conception and another at the resurrection—something he considers impossible? Not as Thomas sees it. Aquinas's view was that for a living thing to exist is simply for it to be alive, which seems plausible enough.<sup>23</sup> He also held that no creature is identical to its existence.<sup>24</sup> Only God is "subsistent existence itself" (*ipsum esse subsistens*). Furthermore, Thomas held that a living thing's existence is possessed not only by the organism itself, but also by the organism's soul. That is because he followed Aristotle in regarding souls as the "substantial forms" of living things—i.e., the dynamic structures responsible for configuring the "matter" of their bodies such that they are capable of carrying out the range of vital activities that mark them as living. They are the forms *by which* living things exist as the kinds of creatures they are.<sup>25</sup> Now in most creatures composed of form and matter, when the creatures themselves cease to be, so too do the substantial forms *by which* they are members of whatever kind they belong to. Not so in humans, however. Aquinas thought he could demonstrate that human substantial forms—our souls—have their existence not only in an inherent mode, as that *by which* we exist, but also in a subsistent mode, as things capable of existing in their own right.<sup>26</sup> Humans souls are capable of existing in separation from the body, then, and when they do so, they continue on with the *same* existence, the *same* life, as belonged to the humans themselves, even after these humans (being dead) no longer possess it. In other words, when I die, I have lost my life, but my life itself hasn't ceased. It continues on in the possession of my disembodied soul. Because my soul preserves my life (even while *I* no longer live it), my soul also preserves my individual identity as the human I am, retaining the individuating "time stamp" traceable back to my spatio-temporal origins. Indeed, Aquinas believes, it is the soul that is primarily responsible for preserving our individual identity even during our earthly lives. It is the soul's identity-preserving role that allows me to remain one and the same person even as I cycle new matter in and out throughout my life when I ingest and expel materials to maintain homeostasis.<sup>27</sup> For the same reason, if God rejoins my disembodied soul to some matter at the resurrection, I will rise again, resuming the life I lived previously, rather than

<sup>23</sup>See ST 1a.18.3 sc for one passage among many where Aquinas takes Aristotle (*De anima* 2.4.415b13) to support his view that for living things, to exist is to live.

<sup>24</sup>See for example ST 1a.44.1 and *De ente et essentia* chap. 4.

<sup>25</sup>See *Quodlibet* 9.2.2. Gyula Klima gives a helpful account of this difficult passage in "Aquinas on the Materiality of the Human Soul and the Immateriality of the Human Intellect," *Philosophical Investigations* 32.2 (2009): 163–182.

<sup>26</sup>See for example ST 1a.75.2 and 75.5.

<sup>27</sup>See ST 1a.119.1 ad 5, where Aquinas uses the metaphor of a fire, which remains numerically the same over time even as wood is consumed and new wood added, so long as its form remains the same.

some other human coming into existence.<sup>28</sup> Disembodied souls provide Aquinas precisely the identity-preserving bridge we need to explain how God can raise us from the dead.

Lest this last claim be misunderstood, it is important to point out the sense in which I am using the term "identity" here. We sometimes speak of a person's identity as her sense of herself as the person she is. I am *not* claiming that separated souls preserve our identities in this sense. Separated souls, on the Thomistic view I am proposing, are not human persons. When we die, we cease to exist for a time, and hence in a way our identities are lost. Yet even though our souls are not human persons, they nevertheless remain marked by their origins and careers as *our* souls, and hence preserve something of what was distinctive about us as the individual we were, even while we are (strictly speaking) no longer around. It is in this latter sense, then, that our souls preserve our identities after death.

The fact that disembodied souls are able to play this identity-preserving role, explaining the possibility of the resurrection, while attempts to do so without appealing to souls are at least highly questionable, gives Christians one good reason for believing that such souls exist. Another reason, as I explained above, is that they provide a straightforward way of accounting for Christian teachings concerning the intermediate state. After death, our souls are in the "bosom of Abraham" (Luke 16:23), conscious and capable of knowing and loving God, awaiting the day when they will be rejoined to bodies, thus bringing us back to life. At least, so goes the account I am proposing here. Again, I think it provides a much easier way of explaining the possibility of the intermediate state and the resurrection than any alternatives available to disembodied-soul-skeptics. Combining this reasoning with the argument of the previous section (which, again, was meant to show that Christians shouldn't think of disembodied souls as human persons) we now have an argument in favor of cessationist dualism. Are there strong arguments against it? In the following section I'll consider four objections one might raise.

## Objections and Replies

The four objections I have in mind each stem from the account of personal identity Aquinas's cessationist dualism presupposes. First, and most obviously, if a separated soul is conscious, capable of knowing and loving God as Aquinas maintains, then why isn't it a human person? Second, if my soul isn't me, as Aquinas maintains, and yet my soul is capable of thinking and willing so as to

<sup>28</sup>I say here "some matter," but this too is controversial. Some think Aquinas held that for the resurrection to be genuine, our souls must rejoin the very *same* matter as we had before our deaths. My view is shared by Pasnau, *Aquinas on Human Nature*, 389–393. Silas Langley and Jason Eberl suggest two different routes by which Aquinas might claim that souls rejoin the *same* matter at the resurrection in (respectively) "Aquinas, Resurrection and Material Continuity," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 75 (2001): 135–147 and "The Metaphysics of the Resurrection: Issues of Identity in Aquinas," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 74 (2000): 215–230.

continue in these conscious activities in a disembodied state, then doesn't Aquinas face a "two minds" problem when it comes to embodied thought and volition?<sup>29</sup> That is, if *you* are currently thinking about this paper, and *your soul* is currently doing the same, and your soul isn't you, then aren't there currently two minds at work trying to make sense of my views? Third, if separated souls are not us, then how can it be just for God to reward or punish them in the interim between our death and the resurrection?<sup>30</sup> Yet surely this is what God does. Finally, even if it turns out that there are good answers to the foregoing questions, isn't there just as much biblical data suggesting that human persons are capable of disembodied existence as there is for the existence of disembodied souls themselves? These are all good questions, but each can, I believe, be answered.

The first question, why separated souls aren't persons if they're capable of thinking and willing, presupposes a contemporary notion of personhood as something like a "center of conscious experiences, with a unique first-personal perspective."<sup>31</sup> If separated souls have conscious experiences like thought and volition from a first-personal perspective, the objection runs, then surely they are persons. But why accept this definition of personhood? Aquinas, for his part, endorsed Boethius's view of persons as "individual substances of a rational nature."<sup>32</sup> When he says "my soul is not I," he is claiming that souls are not the same persons as humans are in this Boethian sense. Indeed, Aquinas argues that because souls are the substantial forms of human beings, they are not complete substances in their own right, and hence couldn't ever fulfill the Boethian criteria for personhood. Because disembodied souls will continue to live conscious lives, *we* might be inclined to call them persons. But Aquinas would not, and we need not either.

In response to the second problem, it will be helpful to recall something I mentioned in passing above, namely that Aquinas denies that disembodied souls have any sense experiences. The reason why is that he thinks our senses are intimately tied the bodily organs through which they operate—so intimately that it would be conceptually impossible for something without eyes to see, just as it would be impossible for something without a mouth to chew or something without fists to punch. Because of their intimate ties to the body Aquinas maintains that our senses do not have as their subject the soul alone, but the entire human herself—both soul and body together.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, he maintains, there

<sup>29</sup>This is, of course, a variant on the "problem of too many minds" — a phrase coined by Sydney Shoemaker in "Self, Body and Coincidence," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 73 (1999): 287–306 and usually pressed by proponents of animalist theories of personal identity against psychological accounts. David Hershenov presses it against corruptionist dualist accounts like mine in the unpublished talk "Are There Too Many Hylomorphic Individuals Thinking About This Life and the Next?" available online at: <http://www.acsu.buffalo.edu/~dh25/articles/AreThereTooManyHylomorphicIndividuals.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup>This is Eleonore Stump's question in "Resurrection, Reassembly and Reconstitution," 157.

<sup>31</sup>This seems to be roughly the way Lynne Rudder Baker thinks about personhood, for instance, in *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>32</sup>See ST 1a.29.1, and Boethius, *De duabus naturis* 3 (PL 64, 1343).

<sup>33</sup>See ST 1a.77.5.

are intimate ties between our senses and our intellects. For Thomas, human cognition, no matter how abstract, always includes essential contributions from an array of sense-faculties—most notably the interior sense-power of imagination.<sup>34</sup> These views seem to me highly plausible on their own. Put together, they entail that while embodied, our soul never thinks its own thoughts. It is only ever a participant—albeit the chief participant—in the thoughts of the entire human.<sup>35</sup> If Aquinas is correct, then, there aren't too many thinkers currently mulling over my words as you read this—there's just you.

As for the third objection, it is true that proponents of corruptionist dualism must accept that God punishes or rewards one entity—a disembodied soul—for the deeds of another—a human being. But as Patrick Toner points out, we needn't suppose that doing so is always unjust on God's part.<sup>36</sup> The Chri

stian doctrine of original sin plausibly involves God's punishing certain persons for the sins of their forefathers; "in Adam's fall, we sinned all," as the saying has it. But it isn't unjust for God to behave in this way because Adam's sin is somehow present *in* us, however disputed the mechanics of its presence in us might be. Similarly, while disembodied souls aren't human persons, the righteous or sinful deeds of human persons are clearly *in* them in the sense that they retain habits of intellect and will acquired in this life. They are shaped by their careers as parts of us, and for this reason God may justly punish or reward them for our deeds.

The last objection raises the question whether, even if Aquinas *can* avoid thinking of disembodied souls as persons by relying on his Boethian definition of personhood, he *should* do so. When Jesus promises the dying thief "today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43) or when St. Paul says he would "prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8, along with Phil. 1:22–23), are not Jesus and Paul implying that human persons survive death in a disembodied state, awaiting the resurrection? On the cessationist view I am recommending, they are not. The dying thief's soul would join Christ in paradise, and St. Paul's soul is at home with the Lord, but strictly speaking the thief and Paul themselves are dead, and will return to life only at the resurrection. Is this a problem? Several factors suggest to me that it isn't. To begin with, even though St. Paul's soul isn't St. Paul, it remains conscious, and indeed arguably has its conscious experiences from the very same perspective that was Paul's. Does St. Paul's soul, then, think to itself "I am Paul"? If it did, that would be strictly speaking incorrect, on my view. Does it think to itself, "I am Paul's soul"? That would be strictly speaking correct, but a rather odd thing to think! I'm not sure we need to pick between these alternatives. For one thing, I think it wise to refrain from

<sup>34</sup>See ST 1a.84.7 and In DA 3.12.

<sup>35</sup>See ST 1a.75.2 ad 2: "We may therefore say that the soul understands just as the eye sees, but it is more correct to say that man understands with his soul."

<sup>36</sup>I am drawing heavily here on Toner's "St. Thomas Aquinas on Punishing Souls," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 71 (2012): 103–116.

saying too much about “what it’s like” to be a disembodied soul. If Aquinas is correct both that disembodied souls enjoy the beatitude of seeing God face to face, and also that they lack sense experiences, then I think it is safe to say that their inner lives are considerably different than those we live now. For another thing, though, even if St. Paul’s soul thinks “I am Paul,” or, for that matter, even if we say about a deceased grandmother “she is in heaven now,” Aquinas wouldn’t necessarily criticize Paul or us for doing so. These thoughts or statements may be incorrect strictly speaking. But Aquinas appeals to the metaphorical practice of synecdoche to justify addressing prayers for intercession to saints, even though the saints do not, strictly speaking, exist.<sup>37</sup> If we say “St. Paul, pray for us,” we are imposing the name of the whole, “Paul,” on what is in fact only one of his former parts. But given that synecdoche is a perfectly familiar and acceptable way of speaking, there is nothing wrong with our doing so.

This last point highlights what I take to be a chief advantage of cessationist dualism over views that dispatch with disembodied souls entirely — it allows Christians to affirm more robustly what they want to about the faithful departed. When we pray that the souls of the faithful departed might rest in peace, or when St. Stephen prayed “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59), cessationist dualists can take these locutions more or less at face value. When it comes to St. Paul’s wish to be away from the body and at home with the Lord, or Christ’s words to the dying thief, they must appeal to synecdoche, but that is a well-established metaphorical practice. In this way also they can offer comfort to the grieving that the souls of their loved ones remain present with the Lord. If we reject disembodied souls, in contrast, all we can say about our deceased grandmother at present is that she lives on in our memories. Of course, we might also hasten to add, God will someday raise her back to life. But as I’ve pointed out, it is much easier to explain *how* God might raise the dead if we retain disembodied souls than if we reject them. And it is much easier to explain *why* God would need to raise the dead if we maintain that, strictly speaking, our grandmother really is deceased.

As I’ve pointed out several times previously, I do not consider any of the arguments I’ve offered on behalf of cessationist dualism to be decisive, but I hope they will, for some, suffice to tip the scales in its favor. At least I hope they spark interest in what seems to be, outside of Thomistic circles, a relatively neglected position in theological anthropology. As I see it, the view I propose fits much more naturally with what Christians hold regarding life after death than accounts that dispatch with disembodied souls entirely. Yet it also allows us to accommodate many of the factors that recent disembodied-soul-skeptics have cited as motivation. One such factor is dualism’s supposed inability to account for the theological significance of the bodily resurrection. I have argued that in contrast to survivalist dualism, cessationism offers a clear picture why it is crucial that God should raise

<sup>37</sup>See Aquinas, ST 2a2ae.175.6 ad 1 and elsewhere. Turner Nevitt has a helpful discussion of Aquinas appeal to synecdoche in this context in “Aquinas on the Death of Christ: A New Argument for Corruptionism,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 90.1 (2016): 77–99.

us again on the last day.

Another factor often cited against dualism is worth mentioning in closing, namely its supposed bad moral and theological consequences. Some have suggested that dualism leads conceptually or causally to Gnostic contempt for the body and refusal to take moral responsibility in the here-and-now.<sup>38</sup> I cannot say much about this suggestion here. But I would point out that on the cessationist view I am proposing, we're bodies. We're bodies with hope for everlasting life, to be sure, but we're bodies nonetheless, and accordingly the dualism for which I'm advocating comes with the question mark indicated in my title. One could just as well regard my view as a sort of monism, although this might be misleading in certain respects. Regardless of terminology, however, because we're bodies any sort of contempt for the bodily, or refusal to care for bodily needs in the physical world would seem quite out of step with my position. St. Paul concludes everything he's said about the resurrection in First Corinthians not by saying "therefore you can take it easy, knowing that a better future awaits you," but rather "therefore...be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58). If it is indeed a species of dualism I'm advocating here, then it's one whose proponents can say to Paul "Amen."

<sup>38</sup>See, for example, Warren Brown and Brad Strawn, who write that "when...we believe that spirituality is about something inside of us that is separate from our body, we have good reason to focus our attention on the state of our soul and to be less attentive to our actions as whole persons in the world. We also have good reason not to be overly concerned...about the physical, social, or economic distress of other persons" (*The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology and the Church* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 7). Or similarly, "dualism...asserts that humans are composites of two different parts: a material body and a nonmaterial spiritual soul. These parts are not equals in that the soul is considered to be superior to the body and to rule over it. In addition, the soul is immortal, while the body is mortal and transitory. Of course, this concept has implications for how we conduct ourselves and how we view others....[W]e must focus our energies on caring for and nourishing our own soul first and foremost. Only after our soul is given its due are we obligated to seek the spiritual welfare of the souls of others. Finally, if time and energy permit, we can allow ourselves to pay attention to our own body and outward behavior or to be concerned about the physical, economic and social well-being of other persons" (*Ibid.*, 14).

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